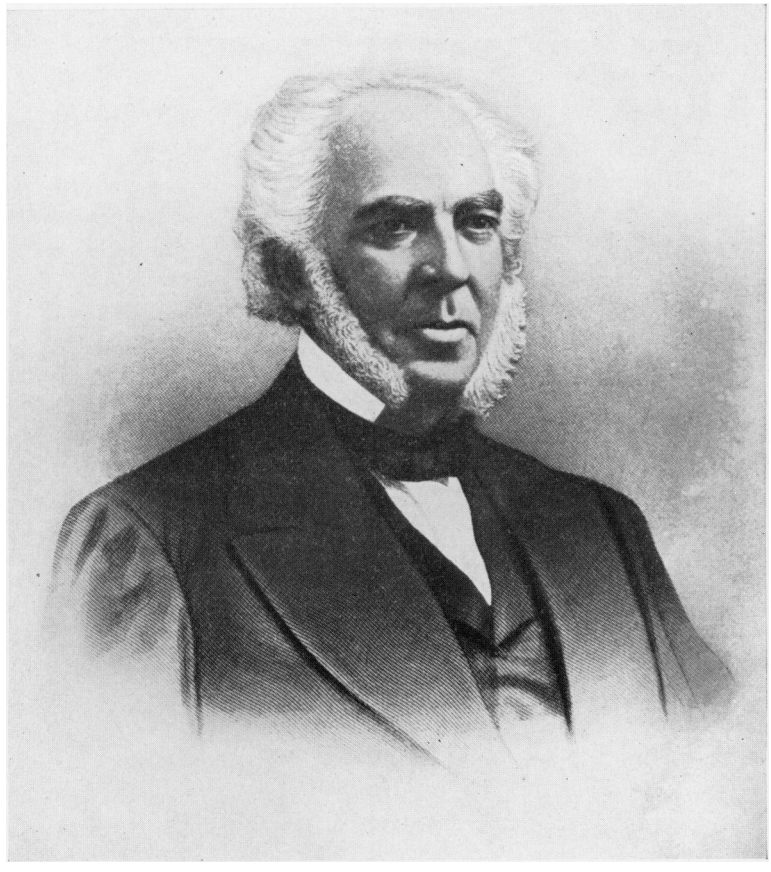

PETER PARKER

1804 - 1888

YALE'S FIRST OPHTHALMOLOGIST—THE REVEREND PETER PARKER, M.D.*

EUGENE M. BLAKE

A century ago the lines of specialism in medicine were not strictly drawn and many physicians were famed for skill in more than one branch of the art. It therefore seems permissible to classify the subject of this sketch as an ophthalmologist since his most conspicuous work, at least in the practice of medicine, was the founding of the Ophthalmic Hospital at Canton, China, in which institution he treated thousands of eye cases. And while others of the early graduates of the Institute of Medicine of Yale College, especially those surgically inclined, did some practice in diseases of the eye, Dr. Parker was apparently the first to major, so to speak, in ophthalmology.

Peter Parker was born at Framingham, Massachusetts, in 1804, of devout Christian parents, and at the age of fourteen developed a decidedly religious outlook upon life and determined to spend his days in the service of God. The necessity of working on the farm for his father until the age of twenty-one delayed his education, so that we find him entering Amherst College at twenty-three. His final year was spent at Yale, and it was while a student here that he decided definitely upon foreign mission work as his particular field and felt that in China there was, perhaps, the greatest need for evangelization. Apparently, up to his senior year, he had not thought seriously of medical work.

After his graduation in 1831 from Yale College, and having permitted himself a vacation of five weeks, we find Peter Parker enrolled as a student in the Divinity School and taking courses in medicine at the same time. In March, 1834, he was granted the degree of Doctor of Medicine, and in May of the same year was ordained as a Presbyterian minister in Philadelphia. Another month sees the newly created physician and clergyman on the seas, bound for China and full of enthusiasm and an ardent desire to lead the Chinese from idolatry to Christianity.

The outstanding achievement of Dr. Parker's medical career was the opening of the Ophthalmic Hospital at Canton on November 4,

*From the Department of Surgery, Section of Ophthalmology, Yale University School of Medicine.

1835. In the first quarterly report of the hospital he explains its genesis as follows: "The dense population of Canton rendered it probable that a single class of diseases would furnish as many applicants as could be treated and accommodated; however, it was designed to admit exceptions in cases of peculiar interest or promise. Diseases of the eye were selected as those the most common in China, and being a class in which the native practitioners were the most impotent, the cures, it was supposed would be as much appreciated as any other."

One can only wonder at and admire the courage and faith of the young physician who sets sail for a foreign land within a month after attaining his degree, and nine months later founds an ophthalmic hospital. But what seems even more remarkable is the skill which Dr. Parker must have possessed to obtain the favorable results which he undoubtedly did achieve. His instruction confined to lectures in medicine, with no hospital training, it is quite likely that he never saw an eye operation, or even many inflammatory conditions of the eye, until he went to China. We can only grant that he possessed a keen mind, great courage and skill, and the favor of the God whom he set out to serve.

The gratuitous practice of medicine for the benefit of the poor in China had been instituted by other and earlier "foreign devils" and had demonstrated that the relief of bodily suffering offered a splendid introduction to the suspicious natives. Dr. Alexander Pierson, a surgeon of the East India Company, had successfully introduced vaccination in 1805. An infirmary for the Chinese poor had been opened at Macao in 1820 by Dr. Livingston and the Rev. Dr. Morrison. Dr. T. R. Colledge, then surgeon to the East India Company, opened an eye infirmary in Macao in 1827, which existed for three years and treated nearly 4,000 patients. These earlier hospitals were, however, not truly missionary endeavors but had arisen from the generosity and sympathy of their originators for the suffering population about them. All through Dr. Parker's twenty-odd years of medical work in China, in spite of long days of arduous toil to relieve physical suffering, his desire and attempts to reach the soul of the patient never lessened—an adherence to his original design to convert the heathen.

The following extract from Dr. Parker's first quarterly report explains the manner of operating the hospital and the nature of the work: "Encouraged by the success of a dispensary at Singapore

for the benefit of the Chinese, where, from the first of January, 1835, to the following August, more than 1000 were received, it was resolved, on my return to Canton, to open a similar institution here. . . After some delay the factory No. 7 in Fungtaehong was rented of Howgua, the senior member of the Cohong, at $500.00 per annum. Its retired situation and direct communication with a street, so that patients could come and go without annoying foreigners by passing through their hongs, or excite observation of the natives by being seen to resort to a foreigner's house, rendered it a most suitable place for the purpose. Besides a large room in the second story, where 200 may be comfortably seated and prescribed for, the house can afford temporary lodgings for at least forty patients. The anticipation that a single class of diseases would furnish full employment for one physician was soon realized and patients in great numbers have been sent away, because no more could be received at one time.

"The regulations of the hospital are few and simple. The porter is furnished with slips of bamboo, which are numbered both in Chinese and English. One of these is a passport to the room above, where patients are treated in the order of their arrival. The name of each new patient, the disease, number (reckoning from the opening of the hospital), time of admission, etc. are recorded. A card containing these particulars is given to the patient who retains it until discharged from the hospital; it always entitling the bearer to one of the slips of bamboo from the porter. The prescription is written on a slip of paper, and this, being filed in the order of its number, as soon as the patient again presents his card, is referred to, the previous treatment seen, and new directions are added. In this way about 200 have been prescribed for in a day. Thursdays are set apart for operations for cataracts, entropia, pterygia, and other surgical cases.

"Difficulty was anticipated in receiving females as house patients, it being regarded as illegal for a female to enter the foreign factories, but the difficulty was proved more imaginary than real. Those whose case required them to remain have been attended by some responsible relative—wives by husbands, mothers by sons, daughters by their brothers, and it has been truly gratifying to see the vigilance with which these relative duties have been performed. The more wealthy have been attended by two, three, or four servants and have provided for themselves. Those who were unable to meet expenses have had their board gratuitously.

"At first, new patients were received daily, until they came in such numbers that they could not be treated, and it became necessary to fix certain days for admission. The total number of patients from the 4th of November to the 4th of February numbers 925, exclusive of several, who, requiring but a single prescription, were not enrolled."

Further along in the first report he gives a more precise account of the ophthalmological work as follows: "Though upward of 50 cataract patients have presented themselves, yet the age, ill-health, or other circumstances of several have prevented operating on more than about 30. On one occasion I couched 8 patients the same afternoon, to 5 of whom vision was immediately restored, and to the others after the absorption of the lens took place. At the request of several patients, both their eyes have been operated at one sitting, and with but little apparent inconvenience. Bleeding has been rather an exception than a general rule in my treatment, the symptoms ordinarily not requiring it. Bilious vomiting has been by no means a uniform consequence of couching. In several instances it has not occasioned to the patient the loss of an hour's sleep and often the inflammation has been so slight that after three or four days the puncture of the needle has been scarcely perceptible—a striking argument in favor of a simple mode of living. There have also been two painful exceptions to the success of these operations, arising from inflammation which it was impossible to foresee or to arrest. In each case, however, the other eye was so much improved that the patients, on the whole, were no losers."

In a later message to the Medical Missionary Society Dr. Parker writes the following brief account of the beginnings of the hospital and its subsequent progress: "It was after long effort, that a place was found for a hospital; and when at length a suitable building was rented and previous notice had been given, the first day no patients ventured to come; the second day a solitary female afflicted with glaucoma, came; the third day half a dozen, and soon they came in crowds. It is difficult to convey to a person who has not witnessed the scenes of the hospital, a just idea of them. He needs to be present on a day for receiving new patients and behold respectable women and children, assembling at the door the preceding evening, and sitting all night in the streets, that they might be in time to obtain an early ticket for admission. He need behold in the morning the long line of sedans extending far in every direction;

see the officers, with their attendant footmen, horsemen, and standard bearers; observe the dense mass in the room below, parents lifting their children at arms length above the crowd lest they should be suffocated or injured, . . ."

A glance at the following list* of eye diseases, which is taken from a report in the *Chinese Repository* for November, 1836, shows the number and variety of cases treated.

Amaurosis	85	Albugo	101
Acute ophthalmia	153	Leucoma	33
Chronic ophthalmia	106	Staphyloma	78
Purulent ophthalmia	59	Staphyloma sclerae	8
Scrofulous ophthalmia	2	Onyx	11
Cataract	150	Iritis	40
Entropia	171	Lippitude	39
Ectropia	3	Night-blindness	3
Trichiasis	41	Glaucoma	7
Pterygium	100	Exophthalmos	4
Opacities and vascularity of the cornea	66	Atrophy	62
		Complete loss of both eyes	148

During the first year of its existence, 2152 patients were received at the Ophthalmic Hospital. This is truly a remarkable amount of clinical material for a new hospital to show, particularly in a country where the people were suspicious of foreigners. Although the diagnosis of trachoma does not occur in the hospital reports, the incidence of entropion (171 cases), trichiasis (41), and opacities and vascularity of the cornea (66), bears testimony to the prevalence of the disease. The listing of only seven cases of glaucoma during the year raises the doubt whether this condition was regularly recognized except in the acute, and possibly in the absolute stages. Considering the frequency with which this disease is overlooked even now, and the lack of training by which Dr. Parker was handicapped, one can only marvel at this great man's diagnostic skill.

Two of the diagnoses require explanation, as the terms employed are now obsolete. One is "albugo" which means "a white spot"—as upon the cornea; the other is "lippitude" which denotes the bleary eye resulting from exposure to light, wind and dust, resulting in conjunctival hypertrophy and loss of the cilia—what would be called to-day "blepharo-conjunctivitis".

* This is a list of eye diseases only and does not include numerous other surgical cases, and is for the first year of the hospital's existence.

In 1838, in accordance with a desire expressed at a general meeting of the Medical Missionary Society at Canton, a hospital was opened at Macao on the 5th of July. Previous engagements to return to Canton, and the absence of any other medical gentleman to take charge of the establishment, rendered it necessary to close it on October 1. Seven hundred patients were received into the hospital during the term. Few important surgical cases presented themselves. The task of gaining the confidence of the people was great and the suspicion and reserve at first were greater than had been encountered at Canton. An Ophthalmic Hospital had been opened in 1827 by Dr. Pearson at Macao and continued in successful operation till 1832, when the increased amount of practice among his own countrymen and the foreigners, compelled its founder to close the institution's doors.

From November 21, 1842, to December 31, 1843, there were treated 3501 patients. In the hospital report for this period Dr. Parker says: "The ophthalmic affections continue to receive prominent attention, although the institution, as reports have shown, has become to a large extent a general hospital." The hospital reports for the years 1848 to 1851, inclusive, show a total of 17,320 cases treated, of which 8,024 were ophthalmological. Approximately fifty per cent of the patients were, therefore, eye cases. An examination of the reports shows many interesting examples of large tumors and growths of various kinds upon the superficial parts, with interesting case reports. The operation for removal of bladder stones was a common one and a photograph of one collection of such stones reminds one of a bin of potatoes. A very capable Chinese artist did about a hundred oil paintings of the more spectacular tumor cases, in about one-half size. These paintings were divided by Dr. Parker, one-half given to Guy's Hospital in London and the other half is now in the department of pathology at the Yale School of Medicine.

How well the hospital filled a need is evidenced by the great demand for medical service. Dr. Parker relates in one of his reports that it was often unpleasant to go to and from the hospital because of the unfortunate applicants for relief. They frequently fell upon their knees in the street imploring help, or grasped him by the arm, pleading the fatigue of long journeys and poverty, and demanding an appointment for admission to the hospital. In some

instances they even pursued him to his home, beseeching treatment and relief. One can well imagine how this kind-hearted physician must have groaned under the physical impossibility of giving more time and strength to these unfortunate creatures.

The following is a testimonial in verse, presented to Dr. Parker by a Chinese gentleman of some literary attainments, who had undergone a successful cataract operation.

His silver needle sought the lens, and quickly from it drew
The opaque and darksome fluid, whose effect so well I knew;
His golden probe soon cleared the lens, and then my eyes he bound,
And laved with water sweet as is the dew to thirsty ground.

Three days thus lay I, prostrate, still; no food then could I eat;
My limbs relaxed, were stretched as tho the approach of death to meet,
With thoughts astray, mind ill at ease, away from home and wife,
I often thought that by a thread was hung my precious life.

Three days I lay, no food had I, and nothing did I feel;
Nor hunger, sorrow, pain nor hope, nor thought of woe or weal;
My vigor fled, my life seemed gone, when, sudden in my pain,
There came one ray, one glimm'ring ray—I see—I live again!

As starts from vision of the night he who dreams a fearful dream,
As from the tomb uprushing comes one restored to day's bright beam,
Thus I, with gladness and surprise, with joy, with keen delight,
See friends and kindred crowd around; I hail the blessed light!

With grateful heart, with heaving breast, with feelings flowing o'er,
I cried, "Oh lead me quick to him who can the sight restore!"
To kneel I tried, but he forbade, and forcing me to rise,
"To mortal man bend not the knees," then pointing to the skies,

"I'm but," said he, "the Workman's tool; Another's is the hand.
Before His might and in His sight, men feeble, helpless stand;
Go, virtue learn to cultivate, and never then forget
That for some work of future good thy life is spared thee yet."

The off'ring, token of my thanks, he refused; nor would he take
Silver or gold—they seemed as dust; 'Tis but for virtue's sake
His works are done. His skill divine, I ever must adore,
Nor lose remembrance of his name till Life's last day is o'er.

Thus have I told, in these brief words, this learned doctor's praise;
Well does his worth deserve that I should tablets to him raise.

Several references in letters and hospital reports testify that Dr. Parker did not forget that part of the Hippocratic Oath which enjoins us to teach the art of medicine to the younger generation. In 1837 he began his medical class with three promising youths, and after that time many went forth to render good service to their fellowmen. In one instance he says, "My senior pupil has successfully operated for cataract in more than a score of instances." In a letter from one of Bishop Pearson's friends we find evidence of the great industry which this medical missionary exercised: "Besides the practice of medicine, which is sufficient at the hospital for half a dozen physicians, Dr. Parker has five pupils under his instruction, one of whom is already fitted to go forth in the practice of surgery, and has operated in diseases of the eye with great success." Further on he says, "Dr. Parker's surgical skill alone would procure him a name and wealth to any extent; but he declines receiving any remuneration for his services to the Chinese, or even a present."

Of his senior pupil, Kwan A-to, whose name occurs several times in his report, Dr. Parker says that he "has already acquired a very respectable amount of theoretical and practical knowledge of his profession, and by his talents, address, correct moral character, and success as an oculist and surgeon, has obtained, in a good degree, the confidence of his countrymen, and the respect of all foreigners to whom he is known. His talents are of an order to enable him to distinguish himself in any pursuit, and particularly in the profession he has chosen, and for which he has the fondness necessary to excel. The majority of operations for pterygium, entropia, cataracts, ascites, etc., have been performed by him."

Dr. Kwan A-to is remarkable as the first Chinese to acquire knowledge of western medicine and surgery, and he afterwards attained a great reputation and accumulated a large fortune. He was placed in the hospital class by his uncle, the artist Lamqua, a disciple of the renowned Chinnery, who was himself so much impressed by the devotion of Dr. Parker in the care of the suffering Chinese that he painted gratuitously the more remarkable cases. Dr. A-to's skill was rewarded by a crystal button from the Emperor, with the title of Mandarin of the fifth rank.

The original painting by Lamqua, the famous Chinese artist, in the year 1844, of Dr. Parker, at the age of forty, in his hospital with the ambidextrous Kwan A-to, is said to have been one of his best, both as to likeness and as a work of art.

The life of Peter Parker might well be considered from several different view-points—the religious and missionary spirit which was never lost sight of in his extremely active medical work; the diplomat, rising to no insignificant height in that sphere; and the general surgeon,—but it seems wise to confine this review to the man as a pioneer ophthalmologist of no mean ability. Dr. Charles J. Bartlett has written most interestingly of our subject in an article entitled "Peter Parker, the Founder of Medical Missions".*

It may, perhaps, be permissible to record here, very briefly, some of the achievements and honors which accrued to Dr. Parker. Upon his first visit home, in 1840, he brought a young Chinese student, in order to perfect his knowledge of the Chinese language. He visited in New Haven, staying at the home of President Day of Yale and at the home of Mr. Edward E. Salisbury. During a visit to Washington he spent considerable time with the Honorable Daniel Webster who asked him to state in writing his views upon the relation of America to China, an effort which eventually brought forth far-reaching results. He preached a sermon to the House and Senate while at the capitol. As a recognition of his scientific achievements he was elected a corresponding member of the National Institute for the Promotion of Science.

In 1841, Dr. Parker married Miss Harriet Webster, a connection of Daniel Webster, and of this marriage a son was born in 1859. During his visit to America he translated Vattel's *Law of the Nations* into Chinese. In Boston he stayed with the Honorable Rufus Choate. In April, 1841, he sailed for England, where he wrote pamphlets, lectured on medical missions, and attempted to raise funds. In France he was presented at Court and interested King Louis Phillipe in China and his work there. After his return he spent the winter in Philadelphia endeavoring to arouse interest in medical missions, and attending medical lectures.

Dr. Parker returned to China in the summer of 1842 and resumed his medical work, taking with him Mrs. Parker, who was the first foreign woman to reside at Canton. As a result of his interviews in Washington the Honorable Caleb Cushing was appointed Minister Plenipotentiary to China, and Dr. Parker was made Chinese Secretary. He later, in 1855, became Commissioner to the Chinese Empire, but poor health necessitated his return to America in 1857.

---

*J. Am. Med. Asso., Aug. 5, 1916.

Among other honors which came to "Yale's first ophthalmologist" may be mentioned his election as honorary member of the Massachusetts Medical Society; Chicago Historical Society; Vice-president of the American and Oriental Society in Boston; Member of the Board of Regents of the Smithsonian Institute, etc. When the Yale Alumni Association was established in Washington Dr. Parker was elected its president. He was also prominently connected with the Philosophical Society of Washington.

Of his work in China one observer says of Dr. Parker, "He wrung admiration from a haughty official class and a reluctant gentry." During the opium war Consul Alabastar remarked that at times of hostilities he would consider himself safer in the Canton Hospital than on a gun-boat. Some one once said that Dr. Parker "opened the gates of China with a lancet when Western cannon could not heave a single bar."

The death of the "Rev. Peter Parker, M. D." at his home in Washington, D. C., on January 18, 1888, at the age of 83, brought to its close the life of a remarkable man. In his efforts to relieve physical suffering and to point the way to everlasting life he was accorded honors and acclaim by his contemporaries and deserves the admiration and respect of men of all times.